**Trip Leader’s Manual – Caving**

**Introduction**

This manual is for those leading caving trips with UVa’s Outdoors Club. It is by no means a comprehensive list of all of the ins and outs of caving, but attempts to divulge some of the finer points which remain unaddressed in the Caving Checklist. This manual assumes that the reader is intimately familiar with the items discussed in the Caving Checklist and seeks only to elaborate on some items and establish a protocol for leading caving trips through the Outdoors Club.

**Emergency Contact Procedure**

You must set up an emergency contact every time you go caving – it would be foolish not to. This way if something goes wrong, you know when help will be on the way. When leading a club trip, the emergency contact can be the officers. You should provide your emergency contact with the following information.

1. Trip plan
   1. Enter cave at [time]
   2. Exit cave at [time]
   3. Arrive back in Charlottesville at [time]
2. Contingency Plan

“You receive an e-mail from me no later than [date and time]. This e-mail will state that all is well and everyone has returned safely.  If you do not receive this e-mail, please text or call me: [your number]. You can also call or text other members of the trip to double check. If there is no reply, you can assume something has gone wrong and proceed to call the Virginia Department of Emergency Management - [804-674-2400](tel:(804)%20674-2400).  They will mobilize a cave rescue team.  You should provide them with the following information:”

1. Important Information
   1. [name of cave] in [name of county]
   2. Entrance: [date and time]
   3. Anticipated exit: [date and time]
   4. Team members: [list of participants]

(Note: you can also leave this information on a slip of paper on your dashboard.)

If the officers are your emergency contact, the title of the e-mail should include the date of the trip and the trip number!

As soon as you return from the trip, be sure to e-mail the officers (and any other contacts you may have set up) saying all is well. We definitely wouldn’t want to send out a cave rescue team if you’re safe and sound in the city.

When stating dates and times, be as specific as possible (ex. Saturday 21 January 2017, 11am).

I personally prefer to be judicious with time – it is far better to be ahead of schedule than behind. For example, if I expect to be in a cave for three hours, I will probably allow for four just in case we find something worth stopping for, someone gets injured and moves more slowly, we end up exploring an extra passage, we get lost, etc. The same goes for driving time, as some caves can be hard to find even if you know where they are.

When setting the “call help if you don’t hear from us by \_\_\_” time, I usually allow for lots of time. If caving on Saturday, I’d set the time for Sunday morning. This is just my own personal preference and there are good arguments for having both earlier and later emergency contact times. Do what’s comfortable for you.

**Party Size and Composition**

Four people minimum, period. There should never, ever be a time you lead a club trip with a group of fewer than four people. This way if one person gets injured, there is one person to stay and two to go get help.

The maximum party size is a little more variable. Part of it is personal preference, and part of it is knowing the cave. Generally speaking, groups of more than 8 people become cumbersome, slow, and hard to keep track of. If going to a cave with tight passages, a smaller party is safer.

Experience is the single thing that has the greatest ability to keep a caving group safe. (Note that an experienced caver has been on *hundreds* of trips, not dozens.) While ideally everyone would be experienced, this is highly unlikely for a club trip. When selecting who joins the adventure, use discretion. It is probably not a good idea to lead a group of 7 virgin cavers to a difficult, tight, technical cave. As a general rule, 1 in 3 team members should have some degree of experience. Skipping over people on the waitlist is not unfair, it’s keeping the group safe. With that said, it is still important to get new people out there to experience the glory that is caving.

As a side note, as the team leader you have the power to bench someone if they will compromise the safety of the team. Under no circumstances should you allow someone to cave while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

**Horizontal Technique Tips**

1. Always maintain 3 points of contact (if not walking upright on your two feet). This can be two feet and a hand; foot, hand, hip; elbow, butt, head; knee, hand, back; etc. Establish a fourth point of contact before moving one of the others. This is a good way to make sure you don’t fall.
2. Count off (mostly for larger groups). Before entering the cave, assign each person a number and have each say their number in turn. This way you know immediately if someone is missing if you can’t see the whole group.
3. Use flagging tape. Remember that when you cave, you really do two caves: the cave on the way in and the cave on the way out. It is very easy to get lost on the way out even if you have a great memory. Lay your flags in such a way that you will know exactly where you came from. I usually lay them in this shape > with the tip pointing toward the way we came from. Develop a system that works for you. Don’t forget to pick up your flags on the way out – leave no trace!
4. Stay safe in tight spaces. Avoid getting stuck upside down – there are many people who have died by getting stuck with their head below their body.
5. Remember to remain calm if something goes wrong. Panic only makes things worse, and if the leader doesn’t remain levelheaded it could be disastrous for the team.

**Decontamination Process**

To prevent the spread of WNS (white nose syndrome) among bats, gear must be cleaned after every caving trip. If you haven’t heard of WNS, it’s worth looking up. Long story short, it kills bats and is highly contagious, so we need to do all we can to help protect them.

When you wash your gear, soak it in bleach. This ensures WNS won’t be spread to the next cave you go to. In the case of clothing that cannot be washed with bleach, a good deal of soap should do the trick. Don’t forget your caving boots and headlamps! These are the most overlooked items when decontaminating gear.

Another note on gear: be certain that trip attendees are using designated caving gear. As caves can easily ruin equipment after only one trip, we want to make sure we’re not ruining rock climbing helmets and backpacking headlamps.

**So You Want to Be a Caving Trip Leader?**

While there are many factors to consider in a caving trip leader, the most important are experience and demonstrated regard for safety and conservation.

If you are ready to become an approved caving trip leader, contact the caving advisor to coordinate a time that works for both of your schedules. Set up a caving trip, and the advisor will shadow you. Again, you ought to demonstrate a high regard for safety (including preparation, organization, group safety, and individual technique) and conservation in every trip you go on, not just your approval trip. Due to the high-risk nature of caving, the caving advisor has the full right to withhold approval for any reason.

Requirements:

* Pass an approval trip with the caving advisor

Recommendations:

* Attend at least 5 ODC caving trips
* Attend one or multiple training trips with the caving advisor